

1. INTRODUCTION

What has become of Gendun Rinchen? Lhasa's best known tourist guide was arrested from his home on the night of 13 May 1993, apparently because police had found out that he was preparing to hand some letters to a group of visiting European Community (EC) diplomats. The letters were about human rights. Since then there has been no news of him.

The EC diplomats called for the immediate release of 46-year-old Gendun Rinchen and of his neighbour, a former monk in his sixties named Lobsang Yonten who was arrested two days before him. On 25 May the Chinese Foreign Ministry denied that their arrest was related to the EC visit and announced that the two prisoners were guilty of "stealing a large amount of state secrets" and "engaging in separatist activities which directly threatened China's national security". The authorities have not disclosed the whereabouts of the two men.

Amnesty International believes Gendun Rinchen and Lobsang Yonten are prisoners of conscience detained for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and association. It urges the Chinese Government to release them unconditionally and without delay.

II. THE ARREST & CHARGES

During early May 1993 police in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, began a series of arrests of suspected Tibetan activists and dissidents. On 11 May Lobsang Yonten, who lived in a bed-sit in the same house as Gendun Rinchen, was arrested. Searching Lobsang Yonten's room, the police found Rinchen's letters. These were reportedly drafts of the appeal Rinchen had written, in English, describing the state of human rights in Tibet. The letters were addressed to the delegation of European Ambassadors who were due to arrive in Lhasa on 16 May 1993 on a fact finding mission focusing on human rights. According to unofficial sources in Lhasa the names of Tibetans arrested for their political beliefs and descriptions of prison conditions were also found with the letters.

As far as the Chinese authorities are concerned, information not already published by the state is a secret belonging to the state, for example, the names of prisoners are not for public knowledge. Gendun Rinchen had not only found out information about prisoners, but was preparing to hand it over to foreigners - in fact, to the highest level foreign delegation that had ever visited Tibet. In a similar case in 1989, Jampa Ngodrup, a Tibetan doctor, was arrested and sentenced a year later to 13 years in jail for compiling a list of prisoners arrested for taking part in pro-independence demonstrations, which he gave to another Tibetan. In 1987 the monk and philosopher Yulo Dawa Tsering had been sent to prison for 10 years for discussing politics with an Italian tourist.

The charges of "stealing state secrets" and engaging in separatist activities" made against Gendun Rinchen and Lobsang Yonten may be punishable under the Chinese Criminal Law by a minimum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment. The law also provides that "when the harm to the state and the people is especially serious and the circumstances especially odious", the sentence can be death.

III. HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING

Gendun Rinchen is described by many of the foreign tour groups he guided round Tibet as sincere, helpful and full of good humour. In 1992 visitors voted him Top Guide of the Year. However, his commitment extended beyond his work as a guide. Most of his spare time was dedicated to monitoring the human rights situation in Tibet: finding information about people arbitrarily imprisoned and serving as a source through which news about his country was conveyed to the outside world.

For some time he had been passing out small hand written notes which he hoped might reach someone outside Tibet. Some of the notes which have now been collected gave the details of demonstrations he had seen; others listed the names of people in his neighbourhood arrested for supporting Tibetan independence.

When he was arrested he was putting the final touches to a dossier which he was planning to deliver to a group of visiting Western diplomats. It was the first time he had tried to do this. According to a letter he wrote to a friend in early 1993 before his arrest, he felt that earlier foreign fact-finding missions, heavily guarded by Chinese security police, had been unable to find out anything about conditions in Tibet. "I understand that the EC delegation is visiting the capital of the Roof of the World in May 1993," he had written to a friend, "I am trying to make an appeal letter to them. I never did it before but now I feel maybe no other Tibetan will do it. If this happens, we will lose a good chance to clear up the misunderstanding."

One of the Tibetans who worked with Rinchen in the tourist business in Lhasa says he did not speak about politics. "I have no idea what his feeling was about the Chinese, because all the time he was talking about human rights; he wanted to tell foreign people what were the true things which were happening in Tibet about human rights. Rinchen was interested in human rights rather than politics", his colleague said.

The American film actor, Harrison Ford, and his wife had met Gendun Rinchen when he was their tour guide during their visit to Tibet in 1992. In an interview broadcast on the BBC World Service on 16 June 1993, the couple publicised their concern for his well-being. According to them Rinchen had talked to them about human rights, but had not discussed political matters: "When we visited the Jokhang, the Barkor, the famous centre of Lhasa, he recounted the demonstrations that had taken place. He did not speak of the political ambitions of those demonstrators. He spoke only of the harsh treatment that they received at the hands of the Chinese authorities... He was concerned about simply the human rights we'd all be concerned about - that the Tibetan people themselves had no right to assemble, had no right to publish, had no right to travel, were basically kept away from foreign visitors as much as possible."

According to people who knew him, Rinchen was opposed to the use of violence. "When people became despairing," says one Tibetan, "when people were discussing going to look for weapons, he often calmed people down, saying that His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, is still against violence and that we still have resources. We talked of using violence but he discouraged us often. 'The Patron is totally against such moves', he would say". In one of his private letters, dated April 1991, he added a comment on allegations that some Tibetans were seeking armaments: "We are not in need of such drastic steps," he wrote. "We believe in truth, not weapons."

IV. BACKGROUND

Born in 1947 in Markham, in Kham, eastern Tibet, Rinchen was a tiny child and even now, barely five feet tall, is still known in Lhasa as the "little one". When he was ten years old his parents fled with him to India, where he attended the school for Tibetan refugees in Mussoorie. Under the sponsorship of the Indo-German Academic Exchange Programme he worked as a mechanical engineer in India for ten years until 1987. When his parents decided to return to Tibet, Rinchen went with them, while his younger brother stayed in India.

From the time of his return until his arrest he worked in Lhasa as a travel guide, first for Lhasa Travel Service and then for China International Travel Service. During the first years following his return much of his energies were devoted to nursing his mother until her death from cancer in 1991. Rinchen had been deeply affected by the deaths of some 200 Tibetans in demonstrations in the previous three and a half years, and acutely conscious of the tortures suffered by the several thousands who had been imprisoned. After his mother's death he dedicated more and more of his time monitoring such human rights violations.

V. INCOMMUNICADO DETENTION

Tibetan sources in Lhasa believe that Gendun Rinchen and Lobsang Yonten were taken from their homes by the *An Quan Bu*, the State Security Bureau, and not by the police, and are being held in the little-known detention centre of Seitru, which makes up part of the Sangyip Prison complex in the north-eastern suburbs of Lhasa.

In 1990, Sonam Dolkar, a 25 year old woman secretly detained in Seitru, was repeatedly subjected to brutal torture for six months. Like Rinchen and his neighbour, she had been arrested on suspicion of planning to contact or assist a foreigner, in her case a British TV journalist. She was only heard of again a year later when she escaped from a prison hospital and fled across the mountains to Nepal. She had been secretly held for months in isolation in Seitru. For the first six months the security police had administered electric convulsion treatment to her every second day and subjected her to other forms of torture. They had stopped only because a prison doctor declared her close to death.

It is believed that a Tibetan man named Tseten Dorje, reportedly a member of the Religious Affairs Bureau arrested on 8 May 1993, and a Tibetan woman, Damchoe Pemo arrested around 20 May 1993 reportedly in connection with Gendun Rinchen and Lobsang Yonten, are also being held in Seitru. No more information is known about them and nothing has been heard of the four prisoners since they entered the prison.